

Air pollution remains one of the most significant environmental determinants of ill health in the UK. The Royal College of Physicians estimates that air pollution contributes to around 40,000 deaths each year in the UK. The associated health harms, which include cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness, cancer and dementia, are estimated to cost the UK economy £50 billion per year and disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, further exacerbating health inequalities.

These health harms are not confined to time periods or locations that breach legal limits. Growing evidence shows these adverse health effects can occur at concentrations well below current UK legal thresholds. This is reflected in the World Health Organization's 2021 Air Quality Guidelines, which set substantially lower recommended levels for NO₂, PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}. In the UK, this has recently prompted an inquiry by the Environmental Audit Committee which will consider whether existing targets are sufficiently aligned with health protection.

Local authorities are increasingly developing Clean Air Strategies to support strategic and consistent area-wide approaches to managing air quality. Across England there is growing precedent for using such strategies to set a clear health-led direction of travel. Several authorities have chosen to adopt locally ambitious targets that go beyond national minimum requirements, recognising the benefits of doing so for population health. For example, Brighton & Hove City Council's Air Quality Action Plan (approved in 2022) aims to reach an annual mean of 30 µg/m³ outdoor NO₂, across all areas of the city by 2027 which is 25% lower than the UK legal requirement of 40 µg/m³. Having set a 30 µg/m³ outdoor NO₂ limit in its 2021-2025 Air Quality Action Plan, Oxford City Council has now gone one step further, aligning with emerging EU standards and setting a 20 µg/m³ NO₂ target by 2030 in its latest plan.

These examples demonstrate that locally defined Clean Air Strategies and targets can play a key role in aligning action with health evidence, rather than focusing solely on minimum legal compliance. In developing a Clean Air Strategy with ambitious air quality targets, BANES Council would be joining a progressive set of councils signalling their dedication to protecting population health and reducing health inequalities, particularly for the most vulnerable.

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